

The Fate of the Documentary

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Today, the “fate of the documentary” is cloudy. This venerable form of thoughtful programming is under direct and indirect assault on a number of fronts. In recent years we in America have witnessed an alarming increase in a form of anti-intellectualism that I dub, aggressive ignorance. This is not fertile terrain in which to nurture documentary film efforts. Because the fate of the documentary rests as much with its audience, as with the form’s practitioners, I have elected to speak to both, today.

We are in a climate in which political theology trumps facts in the formulation of public policy. When truth threatens to weaken support for tenuous positions, we are bombarded with attitude. Television networks have been complicit in this degrading of public discourse. As these same networks are the principal, and natural, venues for documentary producers, we find ourselves vying for an ever-shrinking allotment of air-time and resources.

This sorry state of affairs plays out most disappointingly in the decline in production and distribution support to independent producers by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and its affiliates. What has emerged in place of independent documentaries is lighter-than-air programming the likes of “Antiques Roadshow” (called the “Jerry Springer of PBS by its own staff and crew) and the stupefying “Sandwiches You Will Like” (I confess when I heard of this latest addition to the roster I was sure it was a joke...or perhaps a “Saturday Night Live” sketch) PBS has ceded its once dominant role in the documentary genre to other players...notably HBO and Discovery Channel.

As PBS continues to create new programs that have almost nothing to do with its charter, and even less to do with its once honored brand, it will be the

intellectually and emotionally challenging programs that take the hit. Those would be the documentary programs.

Speaking as an independent producer who delivers programming to PBS, from time to time, I'd like to take a liberty here. A secondary erosion of original independent documentary filmmaking can be traced to PBS' own hypocritical and arcane "National Program Funding Standards & Practices." This latter-day equivalent of Martin Luther's "99 Theses," tacked to the door of every independent producer, precludes funding from any entity that could be **conceived** to have interest or influence in the final program. These constraints are applied even when corporate sponsors stipulate, in writing, to apply no editorial or distribution conditions to their funding.

So it's a matter of appearance...not reality. And speaking of appearance, all this huff and bluster comes from the same network whose flagship program, "The News Hour" is funded by ADM, that's Archer-Daniels-Midland, one of the most heavily fined corporations in America. On that subject, when the punitive levy came down. News Hour host, Jim Lehrer gave it a three-line mention and then quickly moved on.

We all need to "...rage against the dying of the light" to quote Dylan Thomas. The absence of genuine rigor in reporting and commentating allows falsehoods and prevarications to masquerade as received wisdom. When our most trusted news organs regularly rollover on behalf of official spokespersons, the public's ability to form critical judgments is undermined.

As recently as last week, “News Hour” co-host Ray Suarez gave an unusually softball reception to William H. Donaldson, the new head of the SEC.

Chairman Donaldson (late of Donaldson, Luvgren & Jenrette) explained the commission’s position on the \$1.4B settlement with some of Wall Street’s worst miscreants. Departing from their usual format of staging a kind of point/counterpoint debate on issues so large, Ray listened with rapt attention while Donaldson provided PR cover for this obvious hand-slap.

Several erroneous statements were left unchallenged that night. The worst was the suggestion that the paltry 1/3 of that settlement that may be returned to defrauded shareholders would be a factor for consideration in future shareholder lawsuits. In truth, since these same brokerage firms were not compelled to admit to their misdeeds as a condition of the settlement, there is no negative implication whatsoever for them in subsequent civil trials.

The point of this anecdote is to suggest that when even one best and brightest of broadcast news outlets won’t risk access for the sake of accuracy, then the natural nurturing process that builds a constituency for challenging documentary programming begins to break down.

Audiences are not born craving documentaries. An appetite is created over time by witnessing many isolated examples of quality journalism...not merely coverage.

A more subtle, but lingering symptom of damage to the documentary genre arises out of what might be called “cult-of-personality” influence. Certain on-camera experts, such as Doris Kearns Goodwin and Stephen Ambrose and

others, began to appear frequently and prominently in the documentaries of Ken Burns, for example. Their very ubiquity had an unanticipated outcome: it was discovered that a few of this group were less than scrupulous in attributing the actual sources for comments they, themselves, had made.

While not a trivial offense, I found it ironic. To my mind the more egregious behavior of this group was its tendency to hagiography. Like the 3rd string movie critics whose gushing reviews are harvested (when not planted) by movie studios, theirs is a vocabulary rife with superlatives about virtually any person or event. While historians may fall under the sway of media fame, they are obliged not to shed all remnants of ambiguity and nuance in pursuit of name recognition and enhanced publishing revenues.

Speaking of publishing, Mr. Ambrose's "Band of Brothers," a work that makes "A Bridge too Far" look like a median strip, was adapted for the screen. Here we find another example of the faux-documentary, in this case celebrating the glory of war. By some accounts this fluff creation by a man never in combat, was a primary source of inspiration, not to say excitement, for another man, never in combat, George W. Bush.

Populist works of dubious literary value seem to have great sway over our policy makers, as the publication of Tom Brokaw's "The Greatest Generation" would suggest. The subject of an NBC News documentary-lite that aired in January 1999, this collection of anecdotes was very popular with candidate George W. Bush and his inner circle. Such a romanticized portrait of glorious Americans ends up having the net effect of ratifying closely held social/political beliefs by many in power. Those beliefs have lead to mean-spirited social

policies like punitive welfare-to-work provisions, reduction or elimination of drug and alcohol rehab programs and tax cuts for the wealthy. The take-away for our operative majority in Washington and elsewhere seems to be this: If you are unable to get by in this great land, it must be your own fault, and society should not expend resources trying to help you improve your lot. With pabulum replacing real historical analysis, we are turning into a nation of suffering from group false-recovered memory syndrome.

Pardon me, but I was a child of that “greatest generation.” I saw lynching, and Senator Joseph McCarthy, dogs attacking school children, and anti-intellectualism, and the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) my god, doesn’t that have a contemporary ring to it? Not to mention, the Ford Edsel. I, for one, don’t want to go back there! At least not in the context of such a sentimentalized rendering.

George W. Bush is a man born on third base who thinks that he hit a triple. His obvious disinterest in, and disdain for, anything academic or scholarly inspires legions of the aggressively ignorant to form facile and unsupported opinions. Television has chosen exalt this phenomenon through an endless feedback loop of silliness and sophistry. The documentary form, while never in the mainstream, gets ever more marginalized in this environment.

And now we come to the man I refer to as the anti-Frederick Weisman, Michael Moore. Much respected, he has refined his personal brand recognition to a level even Martha Stewart would admire. In making himself the principal protagonist of his own documentary films, a strategy elevated to new heights in “Bowling for Columbine,” he ultimately preaches only to the choir.

Condescension this transparent does not lead to a re-thinking of opinions by those not already in his camp. It just further polarizes opposing factions. And it leaves those in the middle perplexed when high ground collides with low-brow.

Yet another corrosive force actually begins to obscure the visible and intuitive distinctions that once separated infotainment from documentary forms. I cite two examples, here, those being NBC News Special “Road to Baghdad” and ABC News “reality series” “Profiles from the Front Line.”

In the first instance we are treated to Tom Brokaw both as “Voice of God” and on-camera host. Tom is resplendent in his Armani double-breasted blazer with rotating accessories, tie and breast pocket hanky always perfectly matched and just ever so poofed as to suggest a male peacock in heat. Tom visits with a young military family, an Iraqi exile family, a Baghdad professional-class family, and a committed mother/protester. Now, I’m guessing that each of you could write a transcript for this special, even if you didn’t see it. Why? Because you have seen it a hundreds of times before.

This program used a production template designed to mimic a level of gravitas associated with long-form documentary. But it really was nothing more than an interwoven series of the kind of puff-profile/feature pieces NBC and others air virtually every night. Hence, there was no connective tissue uniting these “stories.” When networks adopt the form, but not the rigor or content of the documentary they do violence to that form. And the public, starved of the real thing, can’t be faulted for confusing the faux with the real.

And speaking of the “real,” we all dodged a real bullet when ABC pulled its silly and cynical 6-part series “Profiles from the Front Line.” A precursor to embedded journalism, the series broadcast crew accompanies US Army Special Forces soldiers, chronicling their exploits in Afghanistan. Produced by Jerry Bruckheimer, the aspiring Leni Riefenstahl of the Bush Administration, the series was untouched by ABC News. In what I would call the only true benefit of the Iraq war, this ghastly piece of propaganda was yanked after just two episodes, when we bombed Baghdad...presumably because audiences would not be able to differentiate between Kabul and Baghdad. But then, come to think of it, neither can our leaders.

Without a trace of irony, the vacant time slots were filled by back-to-back episodes of “Whose Line is it, Anyway?”

A word about embeds, if I may. I liken this phenomenon to a cadre of blind persons, each attempting to describe an elephant from different parts of its body. Context is everything, and the strategically fractionated press corps was hobbled by this clever Department of Defense gambit.

Documentary film has been graced by true “embeds” whose total immersion in their stories has opened windows on dark and beautiful secret places. I think of Fred Weisman and David Sutherland, among others. David’s work on his 6-hour film entitled “The Farmer’s Wife” creates the most compelling documentary profile I have ever seen.

When I first submitted an abstract for consideration by this conference, I was in a somewhat different frame of mind than I find myself now. I’m troubled

that recent world events seem to have no lasting impact on audiences. The juggernaut of the most egregiously insipid programming in television history grinds on dulling both intellect and sensibilities. I think I've begun to yearn for "My Favorite Martian"...but with an "Area 51" spin

Documentary filmmaking does not exist in some parallel universe, though these days I almost wish it did. On the contrary, the enterprise of this genre commands full engagement in the world. Where before I was angry at the status quo, that anger is now informed by sadness and a deep concern. Television is my medium. I have defended its cultural and intellectual relevance, and its potential, throughout my career. But television is **just** a medium. Its virtues can be corrupted and its power squandered in service to banal and foolish enterprises.

In truth it's a little presumptuous for me, or anyone, to hold forth on such a broad topic as "the fate of the documentary." Documentary filmmaking accommodates a wide palette of styles and subject matter. Across this vast landscape there are but a few acres that documentarians of all stripes share in common. And it is at that intersection of shared principals that the future of this discipline is cultivated.

One of those shared notions is that documentary filmmakers inhabit a naturally ambiguous, and sometimes, ambivalent world. To my mind, there is an implicit obligation for a documentarian to be both passionate and dispassionate, while pursuing the story. That seeming contradiction is not so much a conundrum as it sounds. It is only through passion that any of us undertakes such a Sisyphean task to begin with. And it is by allowing ourselves to be informed

anew, through the revelation attendant to this form of storytelling, that we imbue the effort with some measure of intellectual integrity.

For me, the revelatory aspect of documentary filmmaking is a kind of gift. It allows the producer/director to step into a world not wholly of his or her imagining. It is akin to other endorphin producing moments:

But it is also a strange and wonderful zone where layers of insight begin to build, one upon another. This arena can only thrive when the mind of the filmmaker has not imposed preconceived walls. Robert Frost wrote: “...something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” Documentarians must not love a wall, either. In the documentary form, the “wall” is what I would call the “single point narrative.” And, it is lethal to the evolution of knowledge and wisdom.

Life comprises **dual** narratives. It is in the tension between countervailing ideas that drama and insight reside. The fate of the documentary will rest, in part, on the ability and willingness of the practitioners of this form to acknowledge subtlety and nuance. I hardly need say that this is a discipline not very common in the world of television, just now.

Producers of documentaries take inspiration from many different sources. In the course of trying to organize my thoughts about this presentation, in fact at the very time I was weaving in the notion of the dual narrative, I happened to hear an exchange on the NPR program “Fresh Air.” Host Terry Gross was interviewing Dr. Robert J. Lifton, visiting professor of psychiatry at Harvard. Given its timely and timeless aspect, I’d like to share a portion of that

conversation with you. While superficially not related to the discussion of the documentary form *per se*, it says everything that need be said about the way a documentarian must think about complex issues.

GROSS: You're worried about us becoming bullies, but the people who support the war are feeling very good right now and see themselves as liberators of people who have been very oppressed. I mean, that's, like, the fundamental difference here. Are we bullies or are we benevolent liberators?

Dr. LIFTON: Yes. You can look at the events on the screen or in our newspapers and have two very different narratives in your understanding of them. One is, as you've said, the narrative of those who are making of the war that we are liberators, we are bringing democracy to Iraq and to the Middle East in general.

The other narrative, which I think is the more accurate one, is that we are bullies. I think the evidence really suggests this second narrative. Those of us who oppose the war don't see the process as leading to a compassionate outcome. We see it as part of a bullying policy all through the world that's dangerous to the world and dangerous to us as Americans.

GROSS: Do you think that these two narratives will continue to define America for a while, the bully vs. the liberator narrative?

Dr. LIFTON: I think these two narratives will continue to define America. I think it's going to be hard to sustain a pure liberator model. But certainly, the narrative of the bully--and it's more than just a bully...it's a whole

psychological projection of not only military domination of the world, but of control of events, of control of history. What I think is forgotten in this, and it's part of this second narrative, is that any effort to control history, any effort to be dominant in the world has to fail. And the failure could bring enormous pain not just to the rest of the world, but to us as well.

As the electronic press both abrogates its best traditions, and co-opts the style of the documentary for its own ends, bonafide documentarians must remain avid fair-witnesses through it all.

Dr. David Thorburn opened this conference on Friday with his description of the Roman god, Janus, guardian of the portals. Janus had two faces...not as a symbol of duplicity, but rather a symbol of his power. And like Janus, documentary filmmakers need to look in all directions. We are not obliged to be neutral. We are obliged to be curious.